

BIRDS' NESTING WITH A CAMERA IN INDIA.

By

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PART I.

(With 6 plates.)

THE SIND AND LIDDAR VALLEYS, KASHMIR.

It was towards the end of June 1920, that I left Srinagar by tonga in time to reach Ganderbal at the mouth of the Sind Valley before tiffin. After this having arranged pony transport for the next morning, I went out into the rice fields to look for nests of the Northern Ruddy Crake (*Amaurornis fuscus bakeri*). My efforts were not attended by much success, as I returned to camp very wet, very dirty and perspiring freely from the efforts of plodding through 18 inches or so of soft mud, having been shown one nest, which was said to have been ravished the previous day, and having flushed a brooding female off another but newly completed. However it served to strengthen my opinion that this crake prefers rice fields and ditches to large reed-covered jhils, of which more elsewhere.

The first day's march was not worthy of note, as the Sind Valley is here very open, and the avifauna differs little from that of the main valley. Beyond finding some sort of Willow-wren's nest containing young ones, and seeing a pair of Red-headed Buntings (*Emberiza luteola*), I noticed nothing of outstanding interest. Willow-wrens and warblers are most confusing birds. Many have such slight differences, that unless one is prepared to shoot on sight, and then examine the shattered remains with the aid of a book, it is usually impossible to say for certain to what species the victim belongs. Thus the identity of this Willow-wren, whose nest I found on three other occasions, all containing small young ones, remains a mystery, although I suspect it to be the Greenish Willow-warbler (*Acanthopneuste nitidus viridanus*). The owner of the nest in question showed itself to be a creature of fixed habit. In a cavity in a branch, the nest had two entrances, or rather according to the tenant an entrance and an exit, as it invariably went in at the top hole and reappeared, when the excitement, which the sight of food always seems to create in children, had somewhat died down, out of another hole about a foot further down the trunk. I have often noticed this trait in birds. A Tailor-bird, which had its abode in a creeper on the verandah of a bungalow I was recently occupying, always pitched on the lowest branch of the creeper, and hopped up invariably by exactly the same route to its nest some four feet higher up. And a Red-flanked Bush-robin (mentioned later on) had the same trick as the Willow-wren, entering its nest, which was under a fallen stump, from one side of a piece of loose bark and leaving from the other. In this case I was able to observe that both the male and female did likewise.

The next day I succeeded in finding a Plumbeous Redstart's (*Rhyacornis fuliginosa*) nest containing three young ones. This was on the underside of a stump overhanging the river, which was now a raging torrent of intensely cold snow-water. This made the getting of photographs a rather unpleasant job, as I had to fix up the camera in the water. The Plumbeous Redstart has all the attributes of the true Redstarts with a great partiality for water thrown in. It is a restless Robin-like bird with a short tail, which it is continually vibrating, and which is of totally different colouration in the two sexes. In the female the base of the tail is white, and this white increases on the outer feathers towards the outside, the outermost feather being almost entirely white. The remainder of the tail is bluish brown. That of the male is wholly bright-chestnut. They effect every mountain torrent and all the side rivers of Kashmir up to considerable elevations, but are not to be found in the main valley, where

the current is sluggish. They feed on the insects on the wet rocks, and sometimes flutter into the air after winged prey. The nest is cup-shaped and made of moss and roots and is lined with hair and wool. The situations chosen are a ledge, well concealed by grass and ferns, the underside of an overhanging tree-trunk, sometimes a fork of a tree, or the masonry of a bridge, and are nearly always overlooking the water. The eggs, four in number, are white, thickly mottled and spotted with yellowish and reddish brown, and are about '76" by '6".

At Gund I began to meet with the Eastern Meadow Bunting (*Emberiza cia stracheyi*), evidence that the bed of the valley was steadily rising, as I have never found this bird lower than a thousand feet above the main valley. This Bunting is the favourite dupe of the Asiatic Cuckoo, but it was now rather too late to hope to find the latter's egg. At Koolan I found two unusual nests of this species, as they were both substantially built cups well off the ground in bushes. The usual nest is rather a flimsy affair placed at the foot of a bush, in the side of a bank or in long grass. The eggs remind one strongly of the Yellow-Hammers', often having the same pencilling, though not usually to such a great extent. I also obtained one most curious egg of this species here, a light grey ground with a zone near the large end of thin concentric circles of a dried-blood colour.

For two reasons I decided to remain one day at Koolan. Firstly because I had decided to cross over into the Liddar Valley, and Koolan is the starting point, and only the previous day there had been a very bad storm, covering the hills with snow down to a thousand feet or so of the valley, probably rendering the Yamhar Pass (13,400 feet) uncrossable. Secondly because from the bushy slopes just above my camp came the far-reaching and long-drawn-out whistle of the Pale Bush-Warbler (*Horornis pallidus pallidus*), a small insignificant bird with a wonderful voice and a still more wonderful egg. There is no need to describe the bird as its notes are frequently uttered and absolutely unmistakable—a plaintive monotone, which one can never quite locate, and which goes on until one feels the bird must collapse from sheer exhaustion. When it does eventually come to an end, it is finished off by two quick sharp notes. It also possesses a rather feeble song. The nest is an untidy globe of grass lined with feathers; but the egg a rich uniform purple brown.

I entertained great hopes of finding a nest, as but a week before a friend had taken one near Srinagar containing four fresh eggs. I had no luck, however, and, returning to camp, consoled myself by taking photos of Jungle Crows (*Corvus coronoides intermedius*), which I enticed into range with pieces of a vile and uneatable plum cake, a ghastly attempt on the part of my cook. The Jungle Crow of Kashmir is a far finer specimen than that of the plains. The bird of the Nilgiris nearly approaches to it, but is I think considerably smaller. There is an even greater difference in the eggs. I was shown a clutch taken at Kotah in Rajputana, which were little if any bigger than Indian House Crows'. Whereas those I have seen taken in Kashmir are about as large as Carrion Crows. The markings too are much pronounced.

The first stage of the appallingly stiff ascent to the Yamhär yielded little beyond perfect views, and even these were few and far between, as the thick deodar forest afforded one but few glimpses of the snow-capped hills, into which one was mounting. When perhaps about 2,000 feet above the valley, i.e., about 9,000 feet up, I came across a Small-billed Mountain Thrush (*Oreocincla dauma dauma*) on its nest among the exposed roots of a deodar. This bird is an exceedingly close sitter and I made an abortive attempt to catch it. I really believe it would have allowed me to photograph it as it sat, and I regret that I did not make the attempt. Once flushed it made off straight down the hillside and never put in another appearance. There were four eggs in the nest, which was made of roots lined exclusively with pine-needles. Three of the eggs were



THE HIMALAYAN JUNGLE CROW (*Corvus coronoides intermedius*).



THE EASTERN MEADOW BUNTING (*Emberiza cia stracheyi*).



JERDON'S HEDGE-SPARROW (*Prunella strophiatus jerdoni*).



HUME'S LESSER WHITE-THROAT (*Sylvia althea*).

normal, a greenish white background specked with pale reddish. The fourth was rather a freak, being very large and having the markings collected in a band round the larger end. The sitting female reminded one strongly of a Song Thrush (*Turdus musicus*), owing, I suppose, to the wearing down of the fulvous margins of the feathers.

Shortly after this I espied a Grey-headed Ouzel (*Planesticus castaneus castaneus*) with its beak full of wriggling insects. After watching it for some time, I came to the conclusion that its nest was somewhere in a low bank just below me. As I was on the point of jumping down, a movement caught my eye and there, where I had intended landing, was a beautifully marked but very evil looking viper just uncoiling itself. I disposed of it hastily with my khudstick, and then discovered that it was evidently there with the intention of satisfying the inner snake, as there too in a slight depression was the Ouzel's nest with two naked young in it. This is the only time I have ever found a Grey-headed Ouzel's nest on the ground. A decayed stump seems to be a favourite site, and I have found them more than 10 feet up against the side of a tree trunk.

I was now at about 10,000 feet and the nature of the forest began to change, birch becoming increasingly plentiful. With this change the avifauna too showed distinct alterations, Flycatchers, Nutcrackers and evidence of a large Woodpecker becoming numerous. I frequently noticed a little Robin-like bird, which I find I described in my diary, written at the time, as "a little earthy coloured fellow with a white throat and abdomen, red flanks and large inquiring eyes, which obviously say: "Who on earth are you. If you mean mischief, go away." Its peculiarly suspicious manner struck me afresh at every encounter. This was the Red-flanked Bush-robin (*Ianthia rufilata*), the female. The male is a much darker bird, having the upper plumage and a patch on the cheeks, extending down the neck and on to the sides of the breast, a dark blue. It has an ultramarine blue eye-stripe, upper tail-coverts, rump, and median wing coverts, and of course the red flanks. They are possessed of a very hoarse danger note like the rasp of a file. I eventually found the nest containing young, which I mentioned earlier on in this chapter. This was procured close to camp at Zaiwan: Zaiwan consisting of a post to mark the camping ground dug into the centre of a small grassy marg looking out across the forest clad snow-capped valley. Three thousand feet below and but three miles distant across the tops of an unbroken sea of firs lay the Sind river, a narrow gleaming ribbon emerging from the frowning narrows of Gangangair. After arriving in camp and while refreshing myself with a cup of tea and the glorious view, I was visited by a Jungle Crow with two distinct white wing bars. I had also noticed one just before leaving Koolan, which had a large white patch in the left wing.

The next morning commenced with the most strenuous exercise I have ever experienced. In just over half a mile measured across the contours, but probably entailing twice that amount of walking, the path rose 1,500 feet. I had to content myself with plodding steadily upwards, and only took note of my surroundings during the many rests my overtaxed lungs forced me to take. The forest, which had for some time consisted exclusively of birch, here became stunted and soon ceased altogether. And so far I had drawn a blank. Some two and-a-half miles further on lay the pass, apparently a mass of snow and probably quite uncrossable, but in between lay grassy slopes dotted with patches of juniper bushes and many small streamlets of ice cold snow water.

The path, thank Heaven, ascended but very gently to the foot of the pass. The very first juniper patch, I investigated, yielded a small compact nest composed of roots and moss, lined with hair and a few downy feathers, and contained three beautiful blue eggs. Nest and eggs might have been those

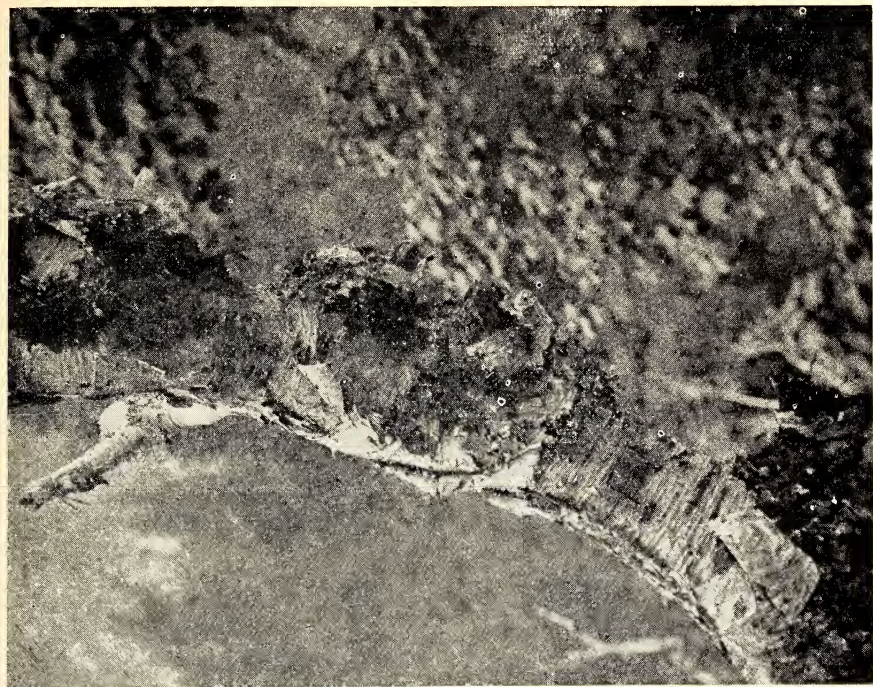
of a Hedge-Sparrow transported straight from home. They belonged indeed to Jerdon's Hedge-Sparrow (*Prunella strophiatu jerdoni*). Later I found many more nests mostly being built, others containing but one or two eggs, but none as yet with their full compliment. This first nest was at an elevation of no less than 12,200 feet and was the highest I obtained, though I am sure that there were still more to be had at higher elevations.

At the foot of the pass, 12,500 feet, many Hodgson's Pipits (*Anthus roseatus*) were to be seen running round the edge of Kem Sär, a small half frozen tarn, and when I was laboriously pulling myself up the side of the Yamhär itself, feeling like an exhausted fly on a window pane, an Eastern Blue Rock Thrush (*Petrophila solitaria pandoo*) flew out of a mass of rocks I was crawling through, and seemed very agitated at my presence. Between 13 and 14 thousand feet hardly seems a suitable elevation, at which to bring up a family. The only other birds I noticed in this region were the inevitable Jungle Crow and the Lammergeyer (*Gypaëtus barbatus grandis*).

As soon as I had crossed the pass, which I was able to do by pulling myself up a narrow chimney, which the driving snow had left more or less clear, and which was about half a mile to the left of the actual road, and brought one out about 200 feet higher, I fell in with a bird for which I was especially on the lookout, namely, the Yellow-billed Chough (*Pyrhcorax graculus*). The nature of the country was here very different. A narrow valley, commencing in a semi-circle of towering cliffs, descended more or less gently for some ten miles, eventually debouching into the Liddar Valley at Liddarwat. The right face of the valley was dominated by snow-covered heights of 15,000 feet or more. Himalayan Griffions and an occasional Bearded Vulture were to be seen like tiny specks, closely following the line of the cliffs. From the left bank of the tiny stream, which grew in volume with almost every step, rose grassy slopes strewn with masses of tumbled rocks, the homes of numerous marmots. Everywhere were patches of melting snow, forming tiny rivulets, at the edges of which many Hodgson's Pipits were feeding. Other vegetation there was none.

I pitched camp at Sekwas (about 11,250 feet) three miles down the valley. Here on the left too there was a massive perpendicular cliff, at the foot of which the patches of Juniper made their reappearance. Choughs were very plentiful. Bands of them sported overhead, one moment flying steadily like any serious crow, the next swerving, tumbling, and rolling earthwards in a peculiarly careless flight, the wind eddies amongst the broken cliffs probably accounting for these weird antics. The Yellow-billed Chough, slightly smaller than the Common Indian Crow is black plumaged, the wings and tail highly glossy, and has a short and practically straight yellow beak and red legs and feet. I was told by a friend, who was at this time at Sonemarg, which is not far distant and at about the same elevation, that there the red-billed variety (*Pyrhcorax pyrrhcorax*), in which the bill is long slender and curved, was common, while not a Yellow-billed Chough was to be seen. The cliff was apparently their breeding place, as on two occasions I saw Choughs fly out to mob a Griffon Vulture, which had ventured too close. It was of course absolutely unscaleable, so I had to content myself with a distant view of their haunts.

July started with great promise. Two most interesting nests being found within a few yards of one another in the Juniper patch below the cliff: the first that of Tickell's Willow-warbler (*Phylloscopus affinis*). This was a loose sphere of grass about 5 inches in diameter with an entrance in the side. It was lined with Chough feathers exclusively, and held two minute and almost oval white eggs. One appeared to have a few microscopic red spots on it. The nest was only about a foot from the ground and very imperfectly concealed. I am sorry to have to confess that on this occasion I committed murder, as being the only means of establishing the identity of the bird.



THE HIMALAYAN SOOTY FLYCATCHER
(*Hemicteidon sibirica caucabata*).



THE EASTERN WHITE-SPOTTED BLUE-THROAT
(*Cyanosylvia cyanecula abbotti*).



THE DARK-GREY BUSH-CHAT (*Oreicola ferrea ferrea*).

The second nest was of even greater interest. It was let well into the roots of a bush, and was semi-domed, rather like a coconut with a piece cut out of it. Altogether it was about 7 inches in diameter with an entrance hole about $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches across. It was composed of grass, with a lining of goat's hair, and there were four eggs, rather pointed, light blue with red markings at the larger end. They were very like large editions of the Indian Bushchats. I regret that on this occasion I did not have resort to the gun, but I was never quite certain as to who was the owner of the nest. I was unable to sit down and wait for it to return, as it was already late. I had struck camp in the morning and sent the coolies on ahead, and I was now further from my objective, Liddarwat, than when I started. As to the female I can only go by the story of the shikari, who found the nest by nearly putting his foot on it, and who, incidentally, having been engaged to find bears, was by this time quite convinced that his sahib was a little touched. According to him she was an earthy coloured bird with whitish underparts, and ran from the nest, sneaking some way through the bushes before finally taking to flight. One cannot however go by an Indian's description. Should he catch the flash of a small patch of red on an otherwise brown bird, it is quite on the cards that he would say the bird was "lal." A black and white bird might be either black or white but not both. However, I find I have also written the following in my diary; "A bird, which may have been the male, was the same with a blue throat and upper breast and about the size and shape of an English Robin." This bird came quite close to the nest when I was about 20 yards away. I am, therefore, of the opinion that it must have been the nest of an Eastern White-spotted Bluethroat (*Cyanosylvia cyaneula abbotti*), which, I believe, is not supposed to breed within Indian limits. If any of my readers have also found this bird breeding in the Himalayas, I would be most delighted to hear from them.

One other nest besides numerous Hedge-sparrows' fell to my lot. A Hodgson's Pipit (*Anthus roseatus*) flew from under a stone by the side of a sheep-track, along which I was walking. The nest was the typical pipit nest, but the eggs were very much darker than the usual pipit's, having a distinctly purplish tinge about them. There were three in the nest. I was lucky to get a nest with eggs, as there were many young birds about. Hodgson's Pipit is a small dark pipit, and in summer is only to be found at high elevations. They are rather partial to water and stoney ground. In fact I never remember meeting with them on dry ground. They seemed to prefer feeding on the wet stones of the streams and round the edges of the tarns, running and fluttering about like wagtails. They have a sweet little song and the habit of most larks and pipits, but to a more marked degree, and when still some considerable height from the ground, of cocking up the wings and tail and fluttering down like a dead leaf or a butterfly at the mercy of the wind.

Descending below the 10,000 feet level, White-capped Redstarts (*Chaimarrornis leucocephala*) and Brown Dippers (*Cinclus Pallasii tenuirostris*) became increasingly common. Himalayan Whistling Thrushes (*Myiophonus horsfieldi temminckii*) were numerous from a higher level. Choughs were now nowhere to be seen. I had the luck to bring down a Snow Pigeon, the White-bellied Pigeon (*Columba leuconota*) of the "Fauna" (1st Edition), out of a flock, which suddenly burst round some birch trees, which were once again in evidence. Fine heavy birds with a strong swift flight they are, and really beautiful to behold. Like great balls of snow with wings grey, banded with brown, the primaries darker inclining to brown at the tips, a dark slate grey head, pale earthy brown upper back, and upper tail coverts and tail blackish brown, the latter having a broad crescent-shaped white cross-band.

I reached Liddarwat about 5 p.m., having used every plate I had out with me, and reeling in consequence that I had had a very successful day. Unfortun-

nately the photographs of the Willow-warbler's nest turned out failures ; one being moved, the others for some reason I cannot now recall.

My tents were pitched on the left bank of the river on a little open space surrounded by birch and deodars, the latter predominating. The valley at this point is narrow and the hills immense and precipitous, yet thickly wooded to a considerable height. Here the sun rises late and sets early, great black shadows creeping over the river and darkening the opposite hillside in the early afternoon. The air is delightful, crisp and fresh in the morning and pleasantly warm during the daytime. I decided therefore that here was a charming spot to rest. I discharged the coolies, and made up my mind to remain until I felt inclined to move on, with due regard to the unhappy fact, that the powers that be claimed my presence amongst the barren hills of the north-west frontier in but 15 days time.

I had evidently struck one of those peculiar patches of forest, in which for some unaccountable reason all the birds of the neighbourhood seem to be collected. It may be that the feeding in such spots is superior to that in the surrounding tracts, but I often doubt that this can be the true reason, as to outward appearances at any rate there is often no difference in the vegetation or ground whatsoever, and, consequently, one would conclude, in the food supply. Nevertheless for some 300 yards above and below my camp the place teemed with birds ; and beyond this limit the forest was as still as death. My tent was besieged by Jungle Crows ; bands of noisy Tree-creepers dashed piping shrilly from trunk to trunk across my grass plot ; Pied Woodpeckers would converse with one another in staccato tones ; a family of Dippers gambled in the foaming waters and a Himalayan Whistling Thrush down by the river spent all the hours of daylight and most of the night in addition either mimicking every individual member of the avian chorus in turn, or roundly swearing at anything that might threaten its two hefty fledglings, sitting on a branch below it. Flycatchers literally teemed, and every now and then the sweet lay of a Kashmir Wren poured forth from a fallen trunk or moss covered boulder.

The first morning I passed repacking with greater care the negatives I had so far obtained, and after tiffin took up a commanding position about 200 yards from my tent door with my back against a tree, and proceeded to note with the aid of binoculars and my own eyesight the doings of the feathered population. By this means within a couple of hours I had marked down the nests of no fewer than two Sooty Flycatchers, a White-browed Blue Flycatcher, and two Large Crowned Willow-warblers. A Grey-headed Ouzel had a nest behind an enormous boulder, which prevented me from discovering its exact whereabouts. A Red-flanked Bush-robin evidently had its nest somewhere in the vicinity of a fallen deodar, but would not disclose its position, and a Kashmir Wren was busily feeding a large family amongst a small pile of undergrowth almost at my feet.

One is hardly likely to find the nest of the Himalayan Sooty Flycatcher (*Hemichelidon sibirica cacabata*) except by the above means. The bird realises thoroughly the advantages of camouflage, besides which it more often than not builds on a horizontal moss-covered branch or close up against a tree-trunk. The nest is small, and so in the former case from below merely gives one the impression of a slight thickening in the branch. The materials used are largely moss and lichens, and so closely resemble their surroundings. The lining material is hair. It is placed at anything from 15 to 40 feet or more from the ground and generally in a fir tree. The eggs 3 to 4 in number are pale green heavily speckled with reddish, and measure about '65" by '46". The breeding season is extensive. I have found nests being built and containing young in May, June and July. Both sexes are inconspicuous in coloration, but conspicuous otherwise, as they choose some high vantage point, to which they return again and again after frequent sallies in pursuit

of winged prey. Why do birds feed so seldom on butterflies? One would expect such fat luscious morsels to be at a premium. Yet I can recall few occasions, on which I have seen them molested, and then I have noticed that they are not always easily caught, being adepts in the art of dodging and swerving.

The Large Crowned Willow-warblers' (*Acanthopneuste occipitalis occipitalis*) nests both contained young ones. One was at the end of a narrow hole in the ground about a foot deep: the other well inside the decaying end of a fallen pine. The Crowned Willow-warblers are distinguishable by the yellow eye stripes and an additional stripe running from the forehead over the crown. They invariably give away the presence of their nests by a continual loud "teeing" whenever one is in their vicinity.

The White-browed Blue Flycatcher (*Cyornis superciliaris*) though a true flycatcher is rather different in structure and habits from the last named of the family, being rather slender in build. There is considerable dimorphism in the sexes, the male being entirely dark glossless blue above with a white eye stripe, and white below. The blue extends down the sides of the neck on to the breast, forming a partial collar. The female is in no way resplendent, being brown above with pale buff underparts and having dark spots on the crown of the head. The nest was about 7 feet from the ground in a cleft in the trunk of a birch tree, and was an extraordinary structure. First came a foundation of moss and on this a loose structure of thin strips, about 1/8 inch in diameter, of the skin of birch bark. It looked for all the world as if the builder had stolen the paper shavings out of a box of chocolates. A scanty lining of hair finished it off. Unfortunately the building operations were over, as there were three fresh eggs, so heavily speckled with biscuit brown as to completely hide the ground colour. They were slightly darker at the large end. They had a high gloss and a comparatively hard brittle shell and in size averaged .6" by .5". The male was by no means timid, and often came to admire his property, while I was quite close.

The following morning I returned to the same area, but took up a slightly different position. I was soon rewarded by discovering the whereabouts of the Grey-headed Ouzel's (*Planesticus castaneus castaneus*) quarters. These were somewhat unusual, being 12 feet or so above the ground in a thick tangle of small branches sprouting from the trunk of a large tree, of the name of which I am ignorant. Large feathered young ones were in possession, so I left them severely alone, not wanting to make them leave home prematurely, and so become prey to some ruthless marauder. Young birds are very perverse creatures: once startle them into leaving the nest, and it is often impossible to make them remain in it again; no matter how many times one puts them back.

Just behind me in the roots of another large tree was a nest of the Kashmir Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes neglecta*) containing five young ones, some three or four days old. The Kashmir Wren resembles quite closely the English Wren in size, shape and habits, but is much barred and darker in hue, which readily serves as a factor in its identification. The nest is in no way different, and I have also found unlined nests just as one finds them at home.

While watching the Grey-headed Ouzel, the evolutions of a Sooty Flycatcher had attracted my attention. Every few moments it would fly past the same spot in the side of the dead birch, at the foot of which I had posted myself. I could see nothing unusual about the place beyond some loose flaps of bark. There was an enormous boulder close by, on to which I climbed. From this point of vantage, I found myself looking into the nest shown in the accompanying illustration. It contained three eggs in an advanced state of incubation. Allowing my gaze to pass beyond, I was surprised to catch sight of another nest of the same species on a horizontal branch of another birch a few yards